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Kobayhashi Masaki and the Legacy of the World War II

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ABSTRACT

In the 1950s there appeared numerous films which showed the futility of war and critically evaluated the past, their weakness, however, lay in a tendency to sentimentalize history and in the use of melodrama conventions which allowed for the elevation of suffering. The few exceptions are the films by Kobayashi Masaki, who managed to avoid these temptations, thus becoming the most distinguished director of the films that analysed Japan's responsibility for war. In my paper I focus on three works: *The Thick-Walled Room* (*Kabe atsuki heya*, 1953) - the story of prisoners accused of war crimes and imprisoned in Sugamo Prison, who cannot cope with the guilt and are persecuted by the nightmares of the past; monumental trilogy *The Human Condition* (*Ningen no jōken*, 1959-1961) based on a novel by Gomikawa Junpei, which "breaks new ground with its grim descriptions of Japanese atrocities perpetrated on Asians and on fellow Japanese" (Orr 2001: 107); and five-hour documentary Tokyo Trial (Tōkyō saiban, 1983), which provides a fascinating account of the work of the International Military Tribunal. Thanks to Kobayashi's works, the problem of war crimes, of the responsibility for one's own actions and inability to effectively resist the system, gained a totally new dimension.

KEYWORDS: Japanese film, Second World War in Cinema, war crimes, Kobayashi Masaki.

The end of World War II and the announcement of the surrender by Emperor Hirohito began the process of reconstruction of Japanese society which was trying to cope with the awareness of defeat, but at the same time wanted to forget the infamous past. The novels and films that were created in the late 1940s and early 1950s often encouraged coming to terms with the era of nationalism and militarism. The suggested message of many works implied not so much a critical look at war, but releasing the Japanese of responsibility and seeking justification for a certain intellectual turn (*tenkō*), which was based on a rejection of past ideology and the adoption of the democratic order, imposed by the U.S. occupation authorities.

"Post-war authors who have been repeatedly rewriting the recent past do not pretend to present an objective and unified vision of history, but rather, in seeking the 'most acute manifestations' of experience, emphasize the subjective and selective nature of any record" (Tachibana 1998: 1-2). In the

films of this period one can notice the praise for the values that were condemned in the previous era, especially for individualism and egalitarianism, which is evidenced by the works of Kurosawa Akira, Kinoshita Keisuke, Imai Tadashi and others[1]. In all cases, the directors show a strong inclination toward the conventions of melodrama, with its penchant for sublime suffering and pathos.

Condemnation of war usually takes on a personal dimension, as the authors talk about the romantic feeling and fatalism of destiny, thus avoiding a serious historical discussion[2]. On the one hand, individual experiences are incorporated in the social context, on the other, visual images influence our perceptions of the past. "On an individual level, media representations provide those schemata and scripts which allow us to create in our minds certain images of the past and which may even shape our own experience and autobiographical memories" (Erll 2008: 396).

In the early 1950s, there appeared a number of films with a humanist message, showing the futility of war and presenting a negative view of the past, but - as noted by Michael H. Gibbs in his book *Film and Political Culture in Postwar Japan* – in many of them the message boiled down to an attempt to convince the Japanese cinema-goers that they all were innocent victims, they experienced family tragedies and suffered from the loss of their loved ones. Such an approach may not only be found in the *genbaku eiga* – the stories of the people who survived the atomic bomb over Hiroshima and Nagasaki (*hibakusha*), but also in the films about kamikaze pilots, such as *It's the End of the Clouds* (*Kumo nagaruru hateni*, 1953, Ieki Miyoji) which "focuses on the cruelty of a strategy that wasted so many young lives in a futile effort to prolong the war" (Gibbs 2012: 27). This was the way media influenced public opinion and shaped collective memory of the past so that it could be used for ideological purposes.

Film production in those times was strongly influenced by the occupation authorities which after the war issued instructions specifying the desired content, modes of expression and taboo topics (See Hirano 1992: 37-40). Criticizing the command of U.S. forces was forbidden, and so was

[1] These include such examples as: *No Regrets for Our Youth* (*Waga seishun ni kui nashi*, 1946, Kurosawa Akira), *Morning for the Ōsone Family* (*Ōsone ke no asa*, 1946, Kinoshita Keisuke), *Until We Meet Again* (*Mata au hi made*, 1950, Imai Tadashi) and *Twenty-Four Eyes* (*Nijūshi no hitomi*, 1954, Kinoshita Keisuke).

[2] A sentimental tone combined with a critical view of militarism is particularly evident in Kinoshita's films. *The Girl I Loved* (*Waga koi seshi otome*, 1946) is a lyrical story of a young soldier's unrequited love for his half-sister who falls for another war veteran. A similar "love triangle", with two soldiers who return from the war and love the same woman appears in the film *War and Peace* (*Sensō to heiwa*, 1947) by Yamamoto Satsuo and Kamei Fumio.

stressing the presence of foreign armed forces on Japanese soil. It was impossible to make any allusions to the enormity of the devastations of war, or to show the debris as the remains of bombings. The occupation became a taboo subject that could be evoked only indirectly. It was only after the signing of the peace treaty in September 1951 that directors could make films that related to the complicated US-Japanese relations, or referred to the victims of the atomic bomb[3].

Among numerous directors that addressed the issues of the war past and the post-war present, one should distinguish Kobayashi Masaki, who in the 1940s was an assistant to Kinoshita Keisuke, and later became the author of the works that critically analyzed the heritage of feudalism. In his films Kobayashi did not avoid raising controversial topics, and clearly made his position, expressing his leftist views. At times, however, he could not resist the temptation of combining the political involvement with a highly sentimental plot (which is especially true of his works of the early 1940s).

The most important and most original film of the early period in Kobayashi's work is undoubtedly *The Thick-Walled Room* (*Kabe atsuki heya*, 1953) - the story of prisoners accused of war crimes and imprisoned in Sugamo Prison. Kobayashi would return to the subject after many years in his five-hour documentary *Tokyo Trial* (*Tōkyō saiban*, 1983), which provides a fascinating account of the work of the International Military Tribunal. His youthful work, however, made a year after his debut feature film, is "a reflection on the responsibility and the meaning of life; the question how to live with the awareness of your own deeds, and whether you can forget them" (Blouin 1982: 179).

The film is based on the confessions of prisoners, and such an undertaking just a few months after the end of American occupation seemed to be, mildly speaking, a risky idea, which proved to be true, as showed the decision taken by Shiro Kidō, a longtime president of Shōchiku studios, who did not approve the distribution of the film (its premiere took place much later, namely, in October 1956). The script of *The Thick - Walled Room* was written together with Abe Kōbō, a young writer associated with the group "Yoru no kai" (The Night Association), the winner of the prestigious Akutagawa Prize for his story entitled *The Crime of S. Karma*

[3] In 1950 the occupation authorities allowed the Shōchiku film studio to release *The Bells of Nagasaki* (*Nagasaki no kane*, Oba Hideo), it was, however, after the script had been rewritten in such a way that might justify the necessity of using the bomb and at the same time put the blame on the Japanese militarists and nationalists. The first film made after the end of occupation was *Children of Hiroshima* (*Genbaku no ko*, 1952) directed by Shindō Kaneto who wrote the script on the basis of primary schoolchildren's recollections.

(*Kuruma-shi no hanzai*) from *The Wall* (*Kabe*) collection of short stories. In the film one can see the influence of Abe's literary and philosophical fascinations, for instance when raw realism clashes with surreal inserts depicting hallucinations and nightmares of prisoners and the title metaphor of the wall that "here can be seen as the barrier, or boundary, between the conscious and unconscious minds" (Gibeau 1999: 162).

The plot of the film begins in 1949, soon after the dissolution of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East by whose authority the country leaders responsible for instigating the armed conflict were sentenced to death or life imprisonment. General Douglas McArthur, Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) in Japan, announced the establishment of the Tribunal on January 19, 1946, but the trials began on May 3, and lasted for almost two years. In the first scenes, one can see the cell in which Prime Minister Tōjō Hideki was hanged on December 23, 1948. The close-ups show a gallows and a trapdoor. However, the protagonists of the film are neither leading politicians nor military commanders, but the soldiers accused of complicity in the crime and serving long-term sentences. They all belong to the lower class of prisoners (Class B and C) who were convicted for conventional war crimes or common murders, together with those who ordered atrocities, allowed them to happen, or actually committed them. Their trials were conducted independently of the proceedings of the International Military Tribunal. The accused "were held in the countries where they had been stationed. In all 1,068 men were executed" (Jansen 2000: 673), while more than two hundred thousand were removed from their positions previously held in such areas as civil service, industry, media and education.

The action of *The Thick-Walled Room* is set in the notorious Sugamo Prison, situated on the outskirts of Tokyo, where the former spies used to be held, including Richard Sorge. After 1945 about two thousand war criminals were put here. In the first shots Kobayashi emphasizes the authenticity of the scenery by showing the prison building, locked cells, corridors and American guards. At the same time he formulates the opening thesis: "Japan's past has been entombed within these thick walls. Terrifying truths have been buried in here for the past eight years". This does not mean however that Kobayashi refrains from aestheticizing the images, on the contrary, he favors a diagonal frame composition and films the events from the high or low angle, sometimes tilting the camera from its vertical perspective.

Although Kobayashi portrays the community of prisoners by capturing the monotony of everyday life, he also focuses on the tragic fates of several

characters. Kawanishi (Shin Kinzō) cannot find a place for himself in prison reality, falls into depression and attempts to commit suicide. Yamashita (Hamada Torahiko), a humble private, was convicted of crimes he did not commit, accused by the former commander, who wanted to avoid responsibility for the death of civilians. Yokota (Kō Mishima), a military translator, clings to life, hoping that everything will change after his release – he counts on a meeting with a former lover, Yoshiko (Kishi Keiko). Both, Yamashita and Yokota, did not lose contact with the outside world, they were not condemned by loved ones who believe in their innocence. Yamashita gets letters from his sister (Kobayashi Toshiko), while Yokota enjoys regular visits from his younger brother (Uchida Ryōhei).

Their conversations allow the director to express his own views on the past and the present. Yokota condemns war as morally reprehensible and unjustified, but he also argues that prison is not a place where one can re-discover one's humanity, while his brother believes that those who are really guilty, namely, politicians and generals, managed to avoid responsibility. "At first I thought by staying in here," Yamashita says, "we'd become more pure and spiritual. As it turns out, the opposite is true…. We've become cruel. We've become liars. No, we've lost all distinction between lies and the truth. Prison isn't a place to drive the sins out of humanity. It drives the humanity out of the sins".

However, the director is far from clearing his characters of guilt; nor does he try to convince the audience of their innocence, on the contrary. The structure of the film storyline is based on flashback scenes - the images of the war emerge from the prisoners' memories of their crimes or nightmares as they are tormented by remorse. In contrast to the storyline that is set in the present and follows quasi-documentary conventions, the events of the past are depicted in such a way as to bring out their subjective nature, or sometimes to emphasize their phantasmatic dimension. A perfect example may be provided by a hallucinatory scene, shown in surreal poetics, in which Kawanishi is haunted by his memories of the war, visualized in front of his eyes as he is peeping through imaginary holes in the wall of his cell. Disorders of perception are suggested by the setting of the camera - tilted from the vertical position and unstable - and the manipulation of the soundtrack. Horrific scenes are shown in short inserts, where defenseless victims are dying and cry out in unison: "Murderer! War criminal!"

The inability to deal with the past affects the mental health of prisoners, as evidenced by the Yamashita case. In his memories, or rather nightmarish visions caused by loss of consciousness, emerges a realistic picture of the

last days of the war, when the remnants of the imperial army fled from the enemy, trying to find shelter in nearby villages. Yamashita cannot forget the day when Hamada (Ozawa Eitarō), the commander of his unit, executed a defenseless peasant who had put them up before. Many months later, during the trial of war criminals, it is Yamashita who gets accused of committing the murder and sentenced to long imprisonment based on false evidence. Not only did his superior escape the responsibility, but he also took advantage of his subordinate's family situation and took over his farm. The only thing Yamashita is thinking of now is revenge. He cannot accept such injustice of the system and wickedness of human nature. An opportunity to take revenge arises when he receives a one-day pass on occasion of his mother's death. Yamashita sneaks into traitor's house, but once he notices a man sleeping with a small child in his arms, he cannot take his life. "You do not deserve to die", he says. Human feelings turn out to be stronger than his urge for revenge.

Although Kobayashi does not absolve the guilty ones, he wants to diversify responsibility for war crimes and avoids the temptation to equate victims (*higaisha*) with perpetrators (*kagaisha*). The speech given by one of the prison officers, in which he addresses the inmates: "But the fact remains that we are all victims of the war. In that sense, we're not at all different from you", is received with a unanimous objection from his fellow prisoners. Privates do not intend to avoid responsibility, or to put the blame on their superiors, they know that they must atone for their actions, so as to return to society, as claims Kimura (Shimomoto Tsutomu), a voice of conscience of the majority: "Peace is born out of reflection on our own sins. Only if all of us, all of the people could love each other".

Despite the use of the point of view shots and voice-over narration in some scenes, Kobayashi manages to maintain objectivity. It seems that the historical context is crucial for him, as well as a socio-political analysis, and therefore he introduces fragments of documentaries and newsreels. The conversations between prisoners and their relatives during the visits reveal the truth about the situation in post-war Japan, first struggling with the economic crisis and the lack of food, then with the necessity to respond to an armed conflict on the Korean Peninsula and, finally, with the inevitable acceptance of the Peace Treaty with the United States. It was article 11 of the Treaty that aroused a particularly strong opposition at first, as it made the Japanese government unconditionally accept the verdicts of the International Military Tribunal[4]. During this time, however, public

[4] Article 11 of the treaty reads as follows: „Japan accepts the judgments of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East and of other Allied War Crimes Courts both within and outside

attention was focused not on the major war criminals convicted in 1948, but on the other prisoners held in Sugamo. The occupation authorities agreed to the commutation of their sentences under the influence of social pressures and campaigns organized by the National Alliance for Promoting the Release of War Criminals.

Kobayashi also showed a change that occurred at the end of the U.S. occupation, especially after the transfer of control into the hands of Japanese prison staff. By 1950, after the outbreak of the Korean War, the number of troops stationed was reduced. By late 1951 there were 1,349 war criminals remaining at Sugamo. Previously some of them had been released for lack of evidence, some committed suicide, others died of disease. Prisoners also accepted a proposal to organize their own services, which accounted for order in the cells; also, availability of medical services improved, rehabilitation and educational programs were introduced, even the library was opened up (See Ginn 2011: 10-11).

Kobayashi's boldest film, which dealt with the war past, was the monumental trilogy *The Human Condition* (*Ningen no jōken*, 1959-1961), which contained an absolute accusation of a system that deprives individuals of their humanity, turning them into passive killing machines that are capable only of executing orders. "Questions of war crimes and individual complicity, personal responsibility and self-sacrifice, national loyalty and international solidarity - all were explored at great length in this most high-minded of films" (Gibbs 2012: 51).

The script was based on a multi-volume novel by Gomikawa Junpei (1916-1995), Kobayashi's peer, with whom he shared similar political and life experiences. Both served in the Kwantung Army that was stationed in Manchuria and both were taken prisoners at the end of the war. The writer, like the main character of his novel, was arrested by the Soviet troops, while the director spent some time in the U.S. POW camp in Okinawa. The six-volume work by Gomikawa represents the literary movement of "sentimental humanism" (to a greater extent than its film adaptation) which included popular novels telling of the experience of war, such as *Twenty-*

Japan, and will carry out the sentences imposed thereby upon Japanese nationals imprisoned in Japan. The power to grant clemency, reduce sentences and parole with respect to such prisoners may not be exercised except on the decision of the government or governments which imposed the sentence in each instance, and on the recommendation of Japan. In the case of persons sentenced by the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, such power may not be exercised except on the decision of a majority of the governments represented on the Tribunal, and on the recommendation of Japan" (See *Documents on the Tokyo International Military Tribunal: Charter, Indictment and Judgments,* Robert Cryer, Neil Boister (eds.), New York: Oxford University Press 2008).

Four Eyes (Nijūshi no hitomi) by Tsuboi Sakae and *Black Rain* (*Kuroi ame*) by Ibuse Masuji (See Orr, 107-108).

Kobayashi tells the story of Kaji (Nakadai Tatsuya), a young engineer and an idealist, who in 1943 leaves with his wife Michiko (Aratama Michiyo) for Manchuria to work in one of the local mines. His superiors, interested in his report on the impact of working conditions on the performance of colonial workers, offer him a chance to test the theoretical assumptions in practice. In the first section, entitled *No Greater Love*, the director interweaves two aspects of the character's life - the professional one and the private one. We see him first in the role of supervisor of a labor camp, trying to implement liberal principles arising from his conviction of the universal equality of all people and their right to dignity and justice, as well as a loving husband, who dreams of family happiness and creating intimate space into which an external cruelty of the world would not have access (See Standish 2000: 121).

Kobayashi does not offer a romantic story with the war as the background – the impression one could get from the opening sequence when the couple are having a conversation near a sculpture by Rodin. Kaji's love for his wife is his ultimate refuge and the final rampart that will help him defend his views and his own humanity. Their relationship is presented as the embodiment of an unattainable ideal, the realization of the spiritual community which to no avail may be found in typical relations between men and women. Unlike other films set during the war, *The Human Condition* does not portray male friendship, strong group bonds between soldiers, instead focusing on a progressive isolation and alienation.

From the first scenes in Manchuria, we are witnessing a clash of ideals and reality. The character discovers that the rules of the colony are based on violence, ruthlessness and slavery, while any attempt at changing this state of affairs means overturning the entire existing order. In fact, the point is not a conflict with an external enemy, but a struggle with his own people, with superstitions of his fellow-workers and brothers-in-arms, and finally, the fight against racism and intolerance. Kobayashi emphasizes the opposition between individualistic and collective ethics, humanism and nationalism, justice and exploitation, respect for others and contempt for human life.

In every situation, Kaji tries to defend the values he believe in; however, he feels a bitter disappointment, as he learns he cannot change human mentality, nor suppress aggressive tendencies inherent in human nature. It is, however, just a prelude to great brutality and cruelty that he experiences in the second section of the movie, *Road to Eternity*, which is set in a

training center for recruits, and in the third one, *A Soldier's Prayer*, when he is sent to a Soviet prison camp, accused of fascism and war crimes. In the latter part, the roles are reversed, the Japanese soldiers are prisoners, regarded by the Soviets not as humans, but merely as enemies, whereas the living conditions resemble those in a labor camp in Manchuria.

"Kaji rejects his place in the social order and so does not accept personal identity imposed on him by the community. (…) As a result, in the public, world he occupies an isolated position. (…) In the first section, he intervenes between the kenpeitai (gendarmerie units) and the Chinese labourers; in the second section, between the senior soldiers and the new recruits; and in the final section between the Russian authorities, Japanese collaborators and the exhausted Japanese labourers in the prison camp. In each incident, Kaji attempts to negotiate a more liberal humanitarian way of operating within the hegemonic institutions, but, as 'the nail that sticks out', he is beaten for representing a different and more humane masculinity that challenges brutality" (Standish, 127).

The basic problem Kobayashi had to deal with resulted from the need to present complex relationships between the individual and the system, i.e. the situations in which the subject was determined solely by the relations of power, designating a person with a place and assigning the role of executioner or victim, thereby making one's individual beliefs and values redundant and useless. A man caught in the gears of a war machine was the object of fancy drill, which involved a series of disciplinary practices that turned him into an efficient miner, a fearless soldier or an obedient prisoner. For this purpose, he was subjected to constant control and coercion, he could not think or act independently. To produce socially useful individuals, the authorities closed the people in special areas: in labor camps, schools, camps or prisons, thus allowing for the creation of an artificial order, in which everyone had a specific task to perform.

Masaki Kobayashi in *The Human Condition* destroys any illusions one might have about the possibility of complete independence from the relations of power; he also rejects the vision of death as something sublime - suicides committed by Japanese soldiers or the execution of Chinese workers are shown as senseless and cruel acts. The war – he seems to be saying - is a denial of life, it destroys humanity and human reflexes; and it does not comprise any heroic element, while its only symbols are fear and suffering. "Of all the postwar artistic treatment of war responsibility, this is the most soul-searching investigation of personal responsibility for Japanese wartime aggression" (Orr, 108).

In 1978, Kobayashi returned to the topic of responsibility for the war and began working on the five-hour documentary *Tokyo Trial* (*Tōkyō saiban*, 1983) - an account of the trial of war criminals indicted by the International Military Tribunal for the Far East whose proceedings lasted for more than two years. The moment for making such a documentary was not a coincidence, as it was then that a serious historical debate began in Japan over the positive and negative effects of this trial; besides, the majority of the population did not have any knowledge on the subject (See Futamura 2007: 79-81). Kobayashi gained access to an extensive audiovisual material recorded for the needs of the U.S. authorities, and he also included parts of Japanese newsreels of World War II. Documentary material is accompanied by a voice-over commentary read by Satō Kei, one of Kobayashi's favorite actors, known for his most famous films: *Harakiri* (*Seppuku*, 1962) and *Kwaidan* (*Kaidan*, 1964).

The first half hour of the film outlined the historical background, starting with the surrender of Germany and the signing of the Potsdam Agreement, then it went on to the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and ended with the setting up of two international tribunals: in Nuremberg and in Tokyo. As in the case of German war criminals, here too they were divided into three categories: "Class A" were the leaders who participated in a conspiracy to start and wage war , "Class B" - the soldiers who committed conventional war crimes, and "Class C" – those who committed crimes against humanity. This last accusation was later changed to specify it was about "murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation, inhumane acts and other committed before or during the war" (Dower 1999: 456). It should be noted, however, that the Tokyo Tribunal held only criminals belonging to the first category, among which were former prime ministers (Tōjō Hideki, Hirota Kōki, Hiranuma Kiichirō), the ministers of war (Itagaki Seishirō, Araki Sadao, Umezu Yoshijirō, Hata Shunroku) and commanders in chief of the armies (Kimura Heitarō, Shimada Shigetarō, Osami Nagano, Yoshijirō Umezu).

Kobayashi devoted a lot of attention to the first days of the process, which began on May 3, 1946; also, he also explained in detail the technicalities and the organization of work of the tribunal and introduced the key participants in these events: the Chief Justice, Sir William Webb and the Chief Prosecutor, Joseph B. Keenan. He also showed the defendants - sometimes in long shots, sometimes in close-ups – when one by one they pleaded: "Not guilty". Within two and a half years 818 court sessions were held, 419 witnesses were heard, thousands of pieces of evidence were presented, including the records of the preparations for the invasion and

occupation of China, as well as the documents regarding conventional war crimes - rapes, torture, massacres, inhuman treatment, neglect of prisoners, excessive and unlawful punishment (See Cryer, Boister 1999: 531-593).

It may seem that Kobayashi wants to show dry facts and dispassionately present the events, but the statements made by war criminals are juxtaposed with images which aim to arouse in the viewers if not sympathy, then at least reasonable doubt. The accounts of the acts of aggression committed by the Japanese army during the conquest of the countries in Southeast Asia are accompanied by frames showing the nuclear tests at Bikini Atoll, which were carried out by U.S. troops from 1946. In addition, an eyewitness account of the massacre of Chinese civilians in Nanjing, which was the greatest act of genocide committed by Japanese troops, gets juxtaposed with images of the ruins of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the cities destroyed by atomic bombs in August 1945.

One should point out the role of the historical context in Kobayashi's film, regarding the preparations for war in the Far East, but also in Europe, hence the presence of archive material from the 1930s, showing Adolf Hitler's rise to power, his alliance with Mussolini, the annexation of Austria, and finally, the invasion by German troops of Poland and France. Kobayashi mentions the signing in Berlin of an agreement by the governments of Germany, Italy and Japan (called the Tripartite Pact); in the end, he recalls the attack on Pearl Harbor, which gave rise to the Pacific War. Kobayashi "shows Japan's path to war in the 1930s but also the hypocrisy of the victors in the war crimes trials, particularly in ruling out of order attempts (by American lawyers) to raise United States Army Air Forces bombing as a war crime." (Gibbs 2012: 104)

The last part of the film contains the interrogations of suspects, which lasted several months and ended in February 1948. Here, the leading role was taken by the most important person out of the 28 defendants, namely, Tōjō Hideki, General of the Imperial Army, the Minister of War and Prime Minister of the Japanese government between 1941 and 1944, who was directly responsible for the preparation of the attack on Pearl Harbor. "All defendants were found guilty, sixteen were sentenced to life imprisonment, one to twenty, and one to seven years" (Jansen, 673), one committed suicide, one died during the trial. The death sentences were passed on December 23, 1948, in Sugamo Prison, out of those sentenced to life imprisonment three died and thirteen were released conditionally between 1954 and 1958. "Many others were listed as 'Class A' suspects but never brought to trial. Among them were prominent right-wing leaders who amassed great wealth and influence in postwar Japan" (Jansen 2000: 673).

Some historians believed that the Tokyo trials had a much lesser impact on society than the verdicts passed by the Nuremberg Tribunal, which were the only ones to be published in several dozens of volumes and available to readers (Dower, 453). That does not mean, however, that the debate about Japanese responsibility for war crimes was eliminated from the public discourse. From the first days of the trial, newspapers recounted its course; the newsreels, which were compulsorily displayed before each cinema show, included reports of the sessions of the international tribunal. Nevertheless, the issue of collective guilt for the atrocities of war was hardly ever raised. If at all analysis of past events boiled down to blaming political leaders, so it was the state institutions that supported the ideology of militarism and nationalism which were strongly criticized. "No one was supposed to admit individual guilt. (…) Postwar Japanese culture preferred to regard itself as enacting primarily the role of victim" (Tachibana 1998: 11).

In the 1950s there appeared numerous films which showed the futility of war and critically evaluated the past, their weakness, however, lay in a tendency to sentimentalize history and in the use of melodrama conventions which allowed for the elevation of suffering. To a large extent, Kobayashi Masaki managed to avoid these temptations, thus becoming the most distinguished maker of the films that analyzed Japan's responsibility for war. In *The Thick-Walled Room* he shows soldiers accused of war crimes, who cannot cope with the guilt and are persecuted by the nightmares of the past. Then in *The Human Condition* he "breaks new ground with its grim descriptions of Japanese atrocities perpetrated on Asians and on fellow Japanese" (Orr 2001: 107). Thanks to his works, the problem of war crimes, of the responsibility for one's own actions and inability to effectively resist the system, gained a totally new dimension.

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